

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



Championing Digital Equity & Inclusion: A Community-Centered Approach for the Alabama Black Belt

The Elmore Bolling Initiative (TEBI) launched the Black Belt Digital Equity and Inclusion Coalition (BDEIC) in June 2022 to support a community focused and led digital inclusion program for the 17-county Alabama Black Belt region.

Recognizing that digital equity challenges come in many forms—financial, skills, awareness, and access—either to broadband infrastructure, or to the devices and skills needed to utilize online practices effectively, TEBI sought to engage communities at all levels to bring about change.

“We Are Better Together.” TEBI is the lead agency convening regional stakeholders for BDEIC, with a vision to advocate and provide affordable Internet access for all to live, work, and thrive in the South Central Alabama Black Belt region.

Regional informational meetings were held in November 2022 at the University of West Alabama in Livingston,

AL and at Alabama State University in January 2023, engaging more than 100 community stakeholders.

TEBI’s outreach included sharing information in partner newsletters, at city council and county commission meetings, and through emails to targeted groups.

TEBI and its affiliate, GetWiredAlabama, a public-private partnership formed to expand broadband service, participated in all 16 of ADECA’s Alabama Community Broadband Technical Assistance Program listening sessions in the Black Belt region in 2023, encouraging participants to take the broadband speed test and survey TEBI commissioned from Broadband Catalysts. Speed test data helps validate internet availability at broadband speeds and is key to the allocation of future public infrastructure capital projects grant awards. ADECA meeting participants were encouraged by TEBI to become community champions and serve as part of BDEIC. TEBI was warmly received at all meetings.

Clockwise: Aretha Dix, State Senator Bobby Singleton, and Jo McCall join ADECA’s Hale County Technical Assistance Meeting. Hale County Superintendent Michael C. Ryans addresses attendees at Alabama State. Participants at University of West Alabama BDEIC meeting. Meeting with Bullock County Retirees Association President and Bullock County Chapter of ASU Alumni President James Cooks (second from left).



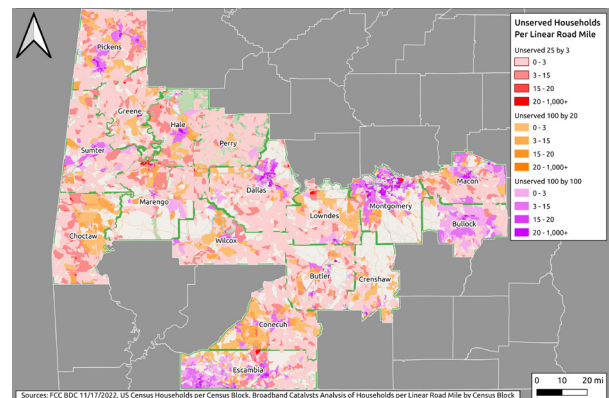
A primary objective of TEBI's Black Belt Digital Equity and Inclusion Coalition initiative is to understand the barriers preventing vulnerable populations from participating in the digital economy. TEBI partnered with Broadband Catalysts to perform community asset mapping using an open-source application the firm developed that displays publicly available broadband data from several sources, including the FCC and open access fiber networks.

The analysis created for TEBI and its partners in the BDEIC region offers actionable and timely guidance on what types of community demand-building efforts for broadband expansion and adoption would be most useful, and where those opportunities are located across the Black Belt region, including:

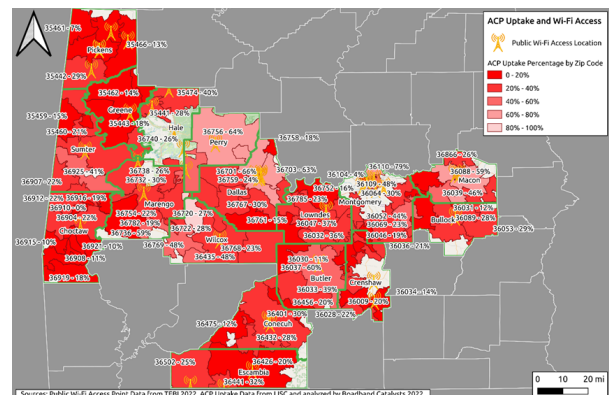
- Which areas, based on household density, can practically be served by **fiber optic or fixed wireless**
- Which areas are unserved by **25Mbps download and 3Mbps upload speed**, the first priority areas for current federal broadband grant programs such as BEAD, USDA Reconnect and USDA Community Connect, and which areas are “underserved” (lack access to **100Mbps download and 20Mbps download**), and are second priority for federal funding (pictured right)▶
- Availability of **public Wi-Fi access** (important in areas where broadband service is limited or is not affordable) and well-served areas in the Black Belt counties.
- Mapping of Affordable Connectivity Program broadband subsidy-eligible **households that are not participating** in the 17 counties, overlaid with **community anchors and public WiFi access** to spotlight where outreach programs can be most effective at increasing ACP uptake. (pictured right)▶

Anecdotal evidence from this project suggests having access to public Wi-Fi increases the likelihood of a household participating in ACP. As a result, TEBI is considering facilities, especially community anchors, that could host additional public Wi-Fi access, with the goal of supporting “new adopters” who can benefit from broadband internet access before having to incur the expense of a subscription, or before enrolling in ACP, such as the elderly or disabled who can benefit from telemedicine and the opportunity to age in place.

Census Blocks Unserved and Underserved with Broadband



Affordable Connectivity Program Participation by Zip Code with Community Anchor WiFi Availability Overlay



Economic growth and community sustainability in the Alabama Black Belt Region requires that broadband infrastructure be **significantly upgraded and expanded** and that all residents and businesses **obtain the skills and equipment** needed to utilize and fully benefit from the internet. Deliberately holistic attention for all aspects of digital inclusion, including **infrastructure and efforts to build capacity to utilize it**, needs to be embraced by leaders across the region and the state to empower the region and leverage a more prosperous future.